

# The Golden Years of Geisha Through 19th Century Photographs

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Dr. Stanley Burns has an eye for vintage photographs. For 37 years Dr. Burns, an ophthalmologist by trade, has been collecting daguerreotypes and early photographs, amassing more than 700,000 exquisite samples of history and culture that are part of [The Burns Archive](#). They range from medicine to politics, from war to religion.

Among this massive collection are photographs that reflect Dr. Burns's interest in Japanese culture, many of which are on display at [Resobox](#), a Japanese art gallery in Long Island City. *Geisha: The Golden Years 1870-1890 from the Burns Collection* runs through Friday, November 30 and consists of hand-painted photographs of geisha.

The photographs that make up the exhibition were culled from Dr. Burns's book *Geisha: A Photographic History, 1872-1912*, which he wrote with his daughter Elizabeth and published in 2006. (The book is out of print, but his remaining stock can be purchased from his [website](#).)



Dr. Stanley Burns with Masakazu Kigure of the Japanese Consulate

Dr. Burns purchased these photographs in the US and Europe, not in Japan. “These photographs were taken for the tourist trade so that people would visit Japan,” says Dr. Burns at the exhibition’s opening reception on November 12. “After the exhibition of 1876, where Japan introduced itself to the world in the World’s Fair, the world became intrigued by Japanese culture

and Japanese design . . . Much of the country was still closed, but there were large areas they could visit, like the seaports.”

It was in those seaport towns, such as Yokohama or Hiroshima, that tourists would enter photographers’ shops and select pictures of interest – geisha, shrines, temples, Mt. Fuji – which the photographers put into albums and sold as souvenirs. The photographers painted the sepia tone photos by hand and even traded negatives with photographers in other cities. Years later Dr. Burns bought those albums, as well as individually framed pictures, and added them to his extensive personal collection.

In each of the albums, Dr. Burns found three or four pictures of geisha, and he began studying how they lived and worked. Dr. Burns was drawn to the intelligence of the geisha, and is adamant about dispelling a popular myth about these Japanese women.

“In the Western mind, the geisha was a prostitute or a loose woman,” says Dr. Burns, “and I wanted to show clearly by dress and education that you can tell a geisha, especially from the antique photos.”

Those photos show that geisha, who were entertainers, wore their obi (sash) in the back, while , who were prostitutes, tied their obi in the front. He feels his greatest contribution is showing the distinction between geisha and oiran. He also emphasizes through the photographs “the training of the geisha, that they’re really artists and had nothing to do with prostitution . . . Everything they did was an art,” says Dr. Burns, “and when you’re educated, you appreciate that.”



Geisha photography exhibition at Resobox

Education was a big difference between geisha and oiran. Geisha performed the traditional Japanese arts of music and dance. The vintage photos in the exhibition show they were highly trained in several disciplines and also studied poetry and other types of literature. Dr. Burns's photographs depict the everyday life of the geisha from practice to performance, from the exotic, such as donning an elaborate kimono, to the mundane, such as eating breakfast.

Dr. Burns also teaches us the story of the "Number 9 Girls." Because the houses with the street number 9 were generally houses of ill repute, the women who lived there were prostitutes, or oiran.

"I learned all this just by studying the albums," says Dr. Burns. "One of the reasons why I collect photography is because you could discover in photographs things that are not written about."



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While Dr. Burns learned almost every detail about each photograph, the photographers are unknown. “Most of the pictures from the 19th century are anonymous. I’m never interested in who took the photograph; I’m only interested in what it shows.”

What these photos show are slices of life in a 19th century culture that is considered exotic, opening a window into another world. Including his book about geisha, Dr. Burns has written 43 books, all influenced by his vast collection, which is stored in his townhouse on East 38th Street or locked in a bank vault. Dr. Burns likes to write books on topics not explored, what he calls the forgotten aspects of history.

“I deal in culture. I’m a cultural historian who uses photography,” says Dr. Burns. “You can forget my sentence, but you will remember the picture. I found that you can educate better with pictures than with words. I can show you pictures that you’ll remember forever.”

And the hand-painted photos of 19th century geisha and oiran life are truly unforgettable.